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'Little Camp,' Big Impact

by Oren Rawls

President Barack Obama, left, and Buchenwald survivor Elie Wiesel, right, at the memorial site for the 'Kleines Lager' (Little Camp) inside Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar, Germany. Photo by Markus Schreiber/AP

Earlier this month, President Barack Obama made a somber visit to the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. He viewed the crematory ovens, the barbed-wire fences, the barracks, the guard towers.

Upon reaching a memorial at the so-called Little Camp, the most notorious section of Buchenwald, the president stopped, laid a rose and paused to reflect.

"He was shocked by the situation that the Americans encountered in 1945," the director of the Buchenwald Memorial Foundation, Volkhard Knigge, said.

"He was deeply touched," added Knigge, who guided Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel on their June 5 visit to Buchenwald.

It was a poignant moment, made all the more symbolic by the much-noted fact that Obama's great uncle, Charlie Payne, was part of the 89th Infantry

Division that liberated one of Buchenwald's satellite camps. It was also a moment that might very well have never come to pass.

Indeed, had Obama's Democratic predecessor tried to visit the Little Camp while still in office, he would have found little more than neglected trees and brush. It was only in 2001, after years of negotiations, that the Little Camp memorial that deeply touched Obama was finally erected — and then only through the persistence of an American government official named Warren Miller.

Miller first conceived of a memorial at the Little Camp in 1994, two years after he was appointed by the first President Bush to the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. The federal agency's mission is to preserve sites of cultural and historical significance beyond U.S. borders, and it was on commission business that year that Miller visited Buchenwald. What he found was a place that bore little resemblance to the one committed to memory in "Night" by Little Camp survivor Elie Wiesel.

"I remember my first return to Buchenwald in the early 1990s," Wiesel recalled to Miller in a letter years afterward. "The 'big camp' seemed intact, clean, silent: a museum. A thick forest of trees replaced the 'small camp' where thousands of Jews perished of hunger, disease and cruel violence."

On a return trip in 1995 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Buchenwald's liberation, Miller proposed the idea of building a memorial at the Little Camp. That same year, the board of the Buchenwald Memorial Foundation, now known as the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, agreed to his proposal.

Miller spent the following two years soliciting more than $100,000 in private donations for the memorial — the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad is a federal agency, but it relies on private donations for its projects — and convincing the German federal government and the state of Thuringia to pledge matching funds.

He also took on the arguably more difficult challenge of getting approval for the memorial from a 15-member curatorial council of historians, as well as from a number of advisory boards representing groups of Buchenwald survivors. In a place with as much moral symbolism as Buchenwald, even

the smallest details became the subject of intense debate.

A series of delays held up completion of the memorial until 2001, and it was only the next year, seven years after it had first been proposed, that the memorial opened to the public. The long-overdue day the memorial was dedicated, Wiesel said at the time, "corrects an injustice."

"When I undertook this project, I never envisioned the time and effort I would have to expend in order to see it through to completion," Miller said. "Elie Wiesel and others warned me from the outset that there was little chance of such a memorial becoming a reality. But I am proud that I persisted, because I believe the memorial helps visitors to Buchenwald appreciate, to the extent it is possible, the enormous suffering of those who were imprisoned in the Little Camp."

The Little Camp memorial has since become a central part of a visit to Buchenwald, which attracts more than half a million people from around the world each year.

The memorial was designed by New York architect Stephen Jacobs, himself a child survivor of Buchenwald. The stones used to build it were taken from a nearby quarry that sits across the slopes of the same mountain, Ettersberg, that Little Camp slave laborers were forced by the Nazis to mine.

Some elements of the memorial, such as the cobblestone path and gnarled tree trunk, are similar to those found at other Holocaust memorials elsewhere in Europe. The text inscribed on the wall of the memorial, however, stands out for its graphic language.

"With only one latrine, many inmates were forced to use their food bowls as night latrines," reads one section of the 350-word inscription, which is repeated along the length of the wall in French, German, Hebrew, Polish and Russian. "By 1945, an ever-present stench of human excrement pervaded the site. Corpses lay about in the open as the death toll increased daily."

Such a non-sanitized description of daily life and death in Nazi concentration camps is hardly the norm at memorial sites. But it is just such gut-wrenching language, said Miller, that shocks the passive visitor into actively contemplating the horrors of the Holocaust.

"I wanted visitors to the Little Camp to be shaken to the core by the memorial's inscription," said Miller. "I wanted them to say 'Oh my God' while reading it and walk out of the memorial a changed person. I am humbled that the president of the United States visited the memorial, and if it had a strong impact upon him, I am gratified."

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